

# DUOLINGO REIMAGINED

## A Neuro-Inclusive UX Audit

How Duolingo's onboarding creates friction for anxious, ADHD, and neurodivergent users—and how to fix it.

A passion project by a neuro-inclusive UX designer  
I AM the user.

# THE PROBLEM

What's broken in Duolingo's onboarding

# The Problem

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- **Broken Promises**

Duolingo promises '9 quick questions' but adds extra screens, widgets, notifications, and profile prompts that extend onboarding indefinitely.

- **Useless Dialogue Screens**

Screens that just say 'Okay, we'll start fresh!' or 'Let's set up a learning routine!' waste time and increase frustration.

- **Eye Strain Design**

Speech bubbles on the right, icons on the left—forcing users to scan back and forth on every screen.

- **Decision Paralysis**

Too many options displayed at once without clear hierarchy or filtering mechanisms.

- **Missing Visual Indicators**

Difficulty levels (Casual, Regular, Serious, Intense) have no color coding to indicate intensity.

- **Inconsistent Information**

User selects '3 min/day' but the next screen says '2 minute lesson.' Trust is broken.

- **Guilt Over Motivation**

Language like 'Can you practice every day?' and 'Don't lose your progress!' pressures rather than encourages.

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# MY PROCESS

How I conducted this audit

# My Process

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## 1. Screenshot Every Screen

I captured each screen during the full onboarding and lesson flow.

## 2. Document Gut Reaction

How did it make me FEEL? Bad, confused, eyes hurt, brain heavy, foggy?

## 3. Identify the Problem

What's actually wrong with this screen?

## 4. Find the Root Cause

WHY does this create friction for neurodivergent users?

## 5. Design the Fix

Create a redesigned version that solves the problem.

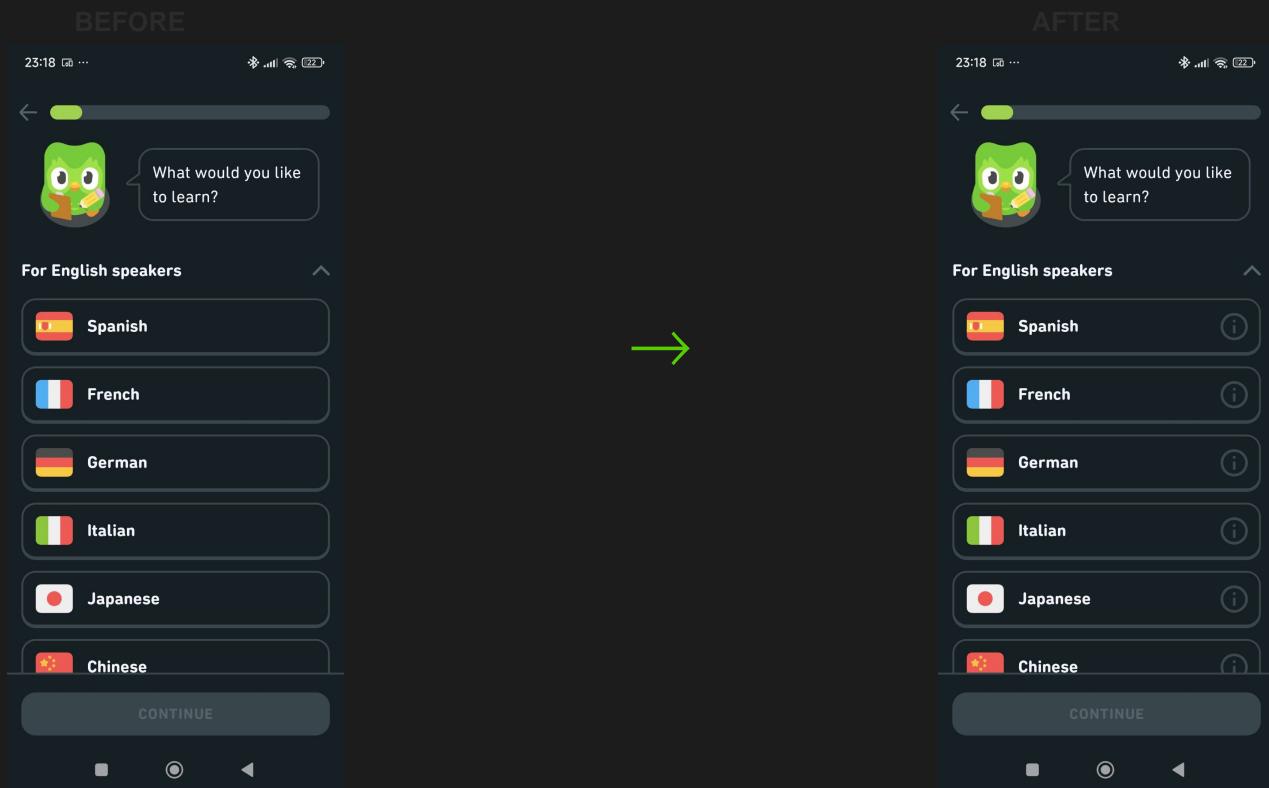
*I don't do formal user research—I AM the user.*

*This is honest, direct feedback from someone who lives with these challenges.*

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# FINDINGS & REDESIGNS

Screen-by-screen analysis with solutions



## PROBLEM

New users face a wall of language options with no way to learn more about each language before committing.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Decision paralysis hits hard when you can't evaluate options. Users might pick randomly or abandon.

## RECOMMENDATION

Add info buttons ( ⓘ) to each language. Tapping reveals difficulty, speaker count, and benefits (see next page).

## MY REDESIGN



## PROBLEM

ORIGINAL: Users had no way to learn about a language before committing. They had to guess or pick randomly.

## WHY IT MATTERS

This popup solves decision paralysis by giving users key info: why to learn it, difficulty level, speaker count, and a fun fact.

## RECOMMENDATION

This is the redesigned popup that appears when users tap the info (■) button. It helps users make informed decisions.



## PROBLEM

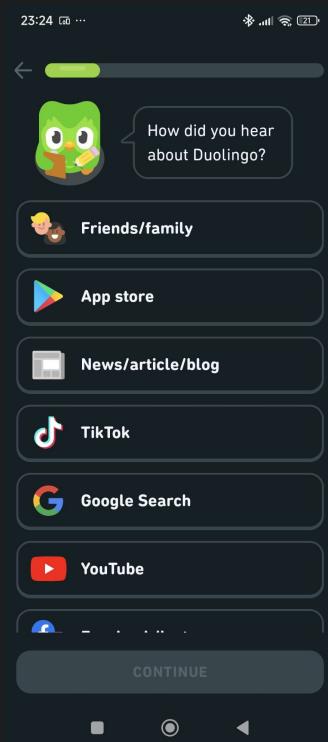
This loading screen feels like a video game intro, not a language learning app. It's filler.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Every extra screen increases cognitive load and time to value. Users want to learn, not watch animations.

## RECOMMENDATION

Remove this screen or make loading happen in the background while collecting useful info.



## PROBLEM

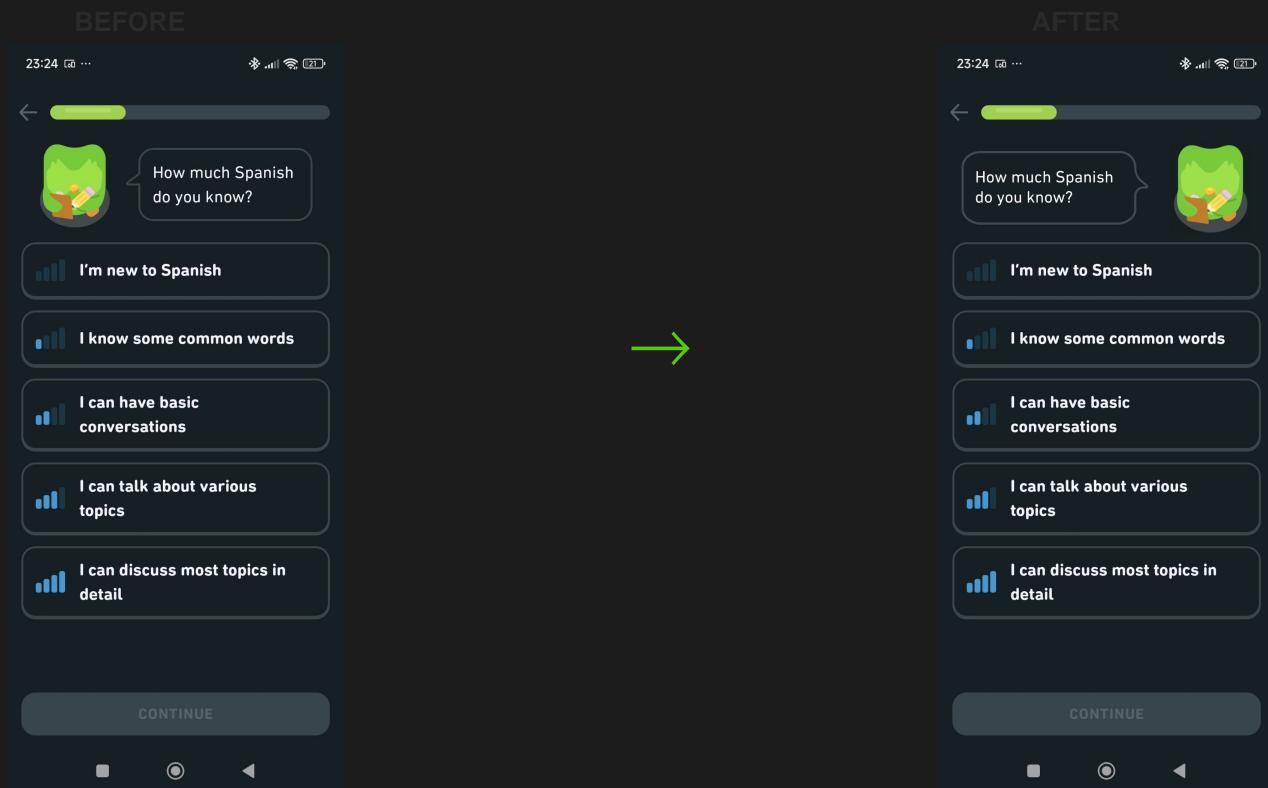
This question only benefits Duolingo's marketing team. It adds nothing for the user.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Asking selfish questions during onboarding breaks trust. Users came to learn, not fill out surveys.

## RECOMMENDATION

Remove this screen entirely or move it to post-lesson or settings.



## PROBLEM

Speech bubble with question is on the **RIGHT**, but answer icons are on the **LEFT**. Eyes ping-pong.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Inconsistent visual hierarchy causes eye strain over multiple screens. Users must read right, then look left.

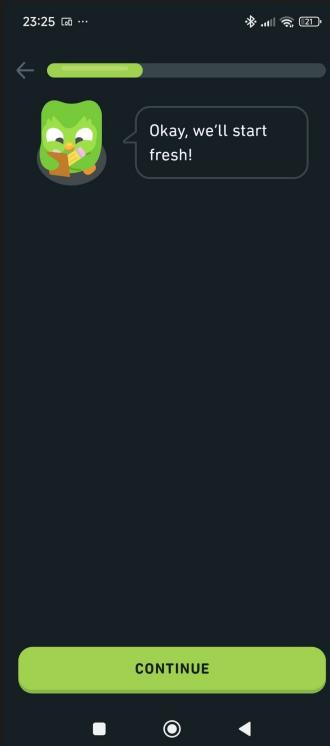
## RECOMMENDATION

Move speech bubble to the left so question and answers flow naturally in the same direction.

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## 'Okay, we'll start fresh!'

ANNOYED



### PROBLEM

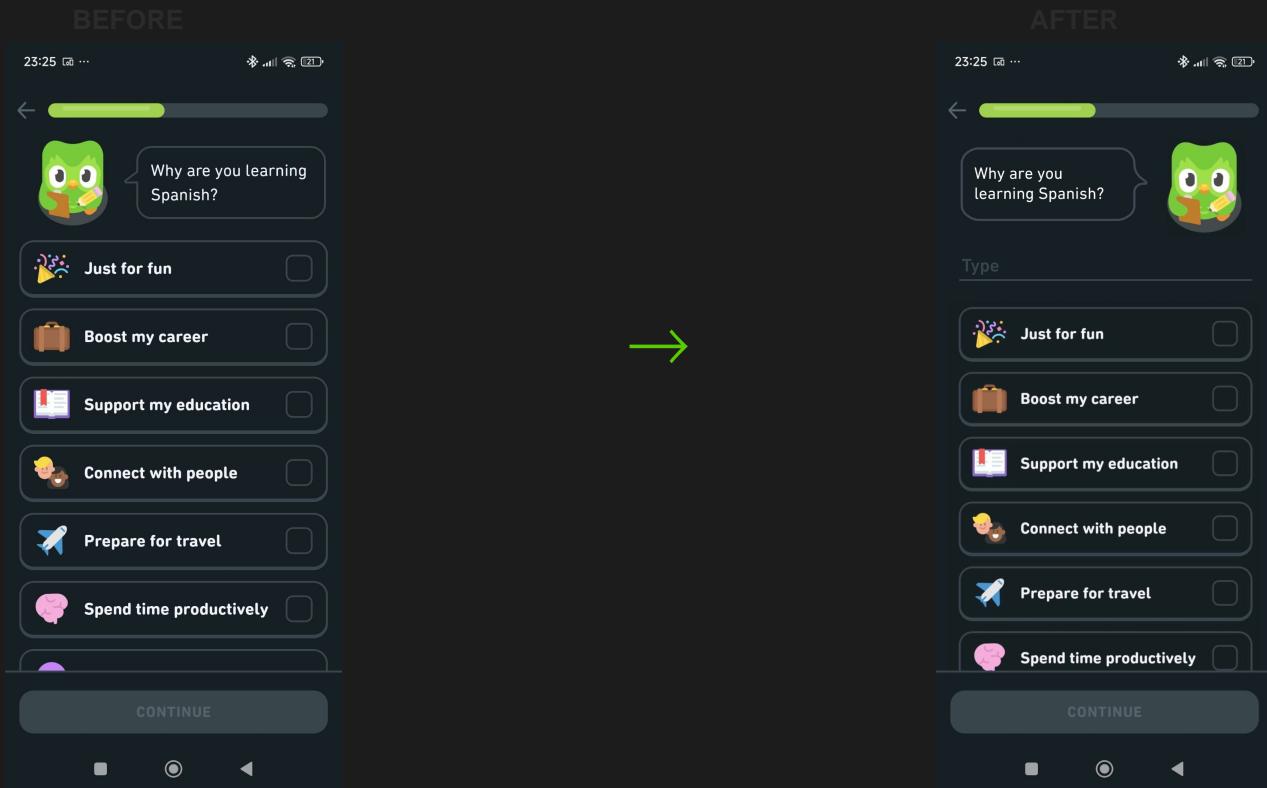
This is a useless dialogue screen. It confirms a choice but requires an extra tap for no reason.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Every unnecessary tap increases friction. This could be a brief animation on the previous screen.

### RECOMMENDATION

Remove this screen. Show confirmation inline or as a brief toast message.



## PROBLEM

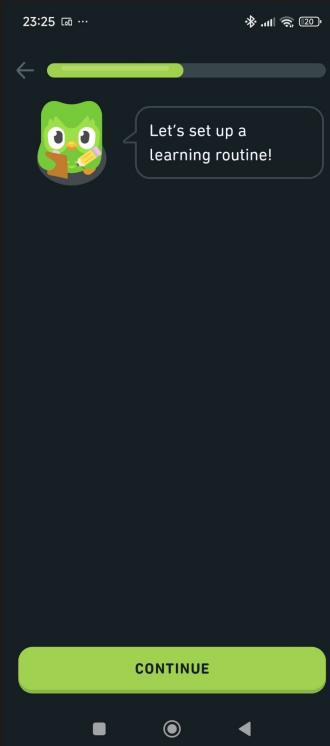
Too many options displayed at once without a way to filter or search.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Decision fatigue sets in with 6+ visible options. ADHD users struggle to process all choices simultaneously.

## RECOMMENDATION

Add a search/type field so users can filter options. Show fewer options initially.



### PROBLEM

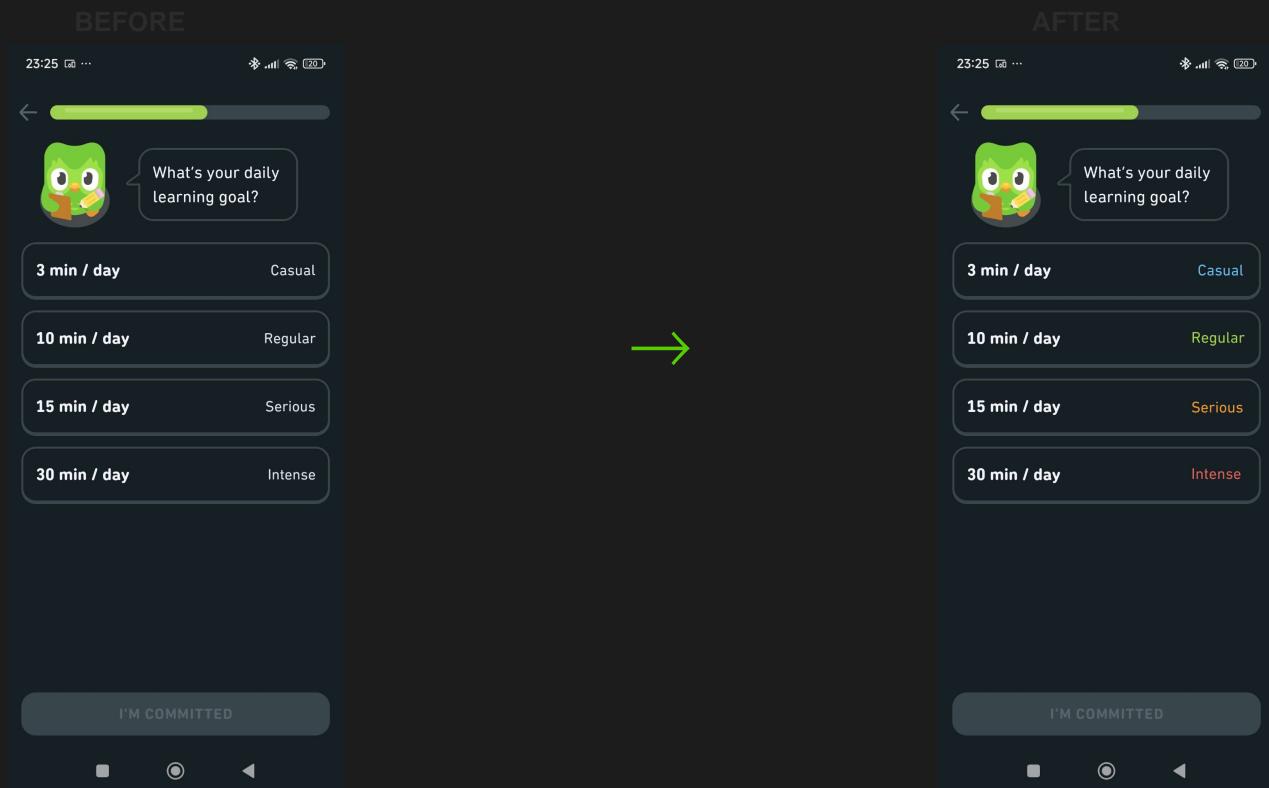
Another filler screen. You promised questions, not announcements about upcoming questions.

### WHY IT MATTERS

These preview screens extend perceived onboarding length. Just ask the question directly.

### RECOMMENDATION

Remove this screen. Go directly to the daily goal selection.



## PROBLEM

Casual, Regular, Serious, Intense—but no visual indicator of difficulty. All options look the same.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Without color coding, users can't quickly gauge intensity. Someone might pick 'Intense' not realizing the commitment.

## RECOMMENDATION

Add color coding: Green (Casual) → Yellow (Regular) → Orange (Serious) → Red (Intense).

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## 'That's 25 words in your first week!'

CONFUSED

**PROBLEM**

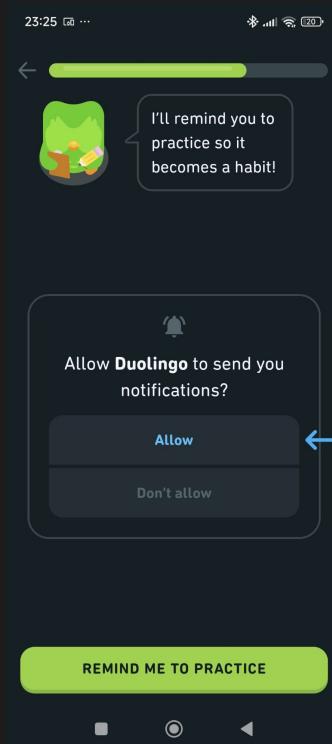
What's the point of this screen? It's motivational fluff that delays the actual learning.

**WHY IT MATTERS**

Users want to start learning, not read projections. This feels like padding.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Show this info inline on the goal selection screen, not as a separate page.



## PROBLEM

You promised questions, but now you're asking for permissions. This wasn't part of the deal.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Permission requests during onboarding feel like bait-and-switch. Users expected 9 questions, not 9 questions PLUS requests.

## RECOMMENDATION

Ask for notifications AFTER the first lesson, when users have experienced value.



### PROBLEM

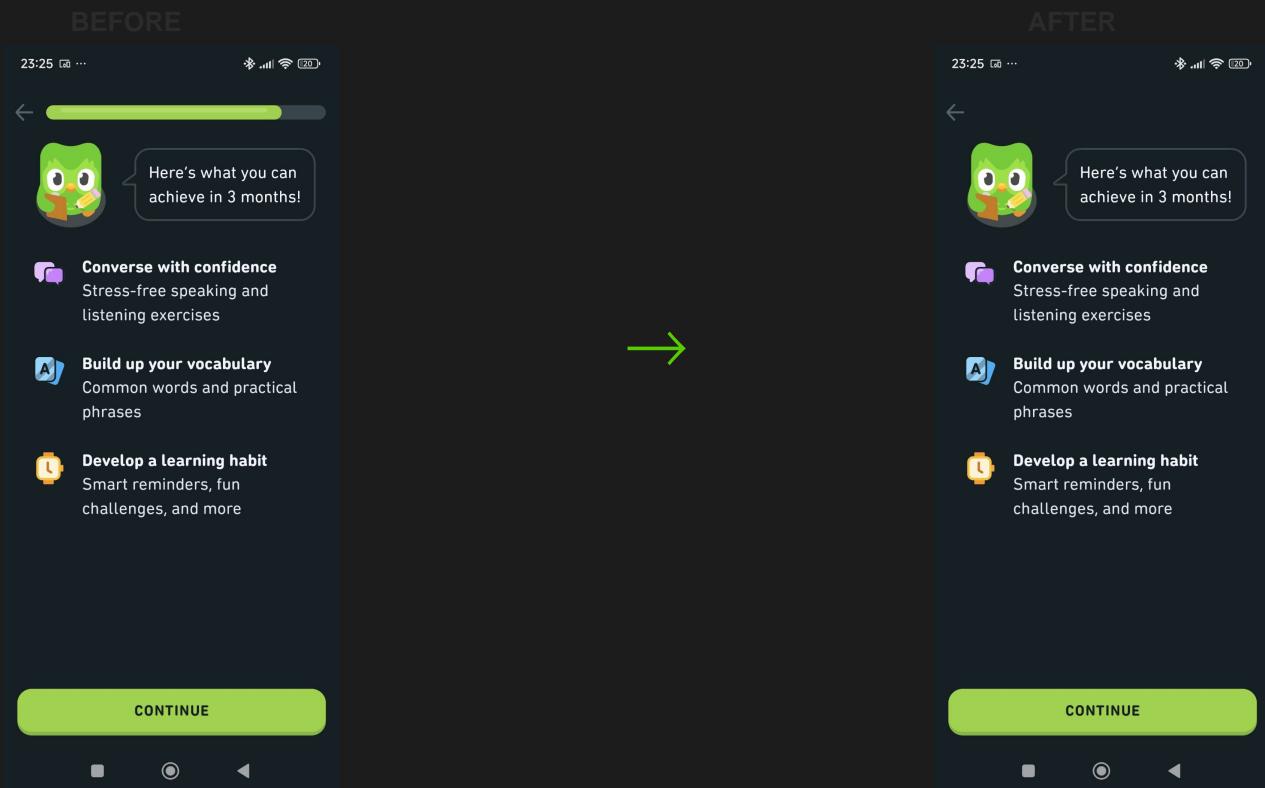
Another non-question screen. The onboarding keeps growing beyond what was promised.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Each extra prompt erodes trust. Users feel tricked into a longer process than advertised.

### RECOMMENDATION

Move widget prompt to post-lesson or settings. Don't interrupt onboarding.



## PROBLEM

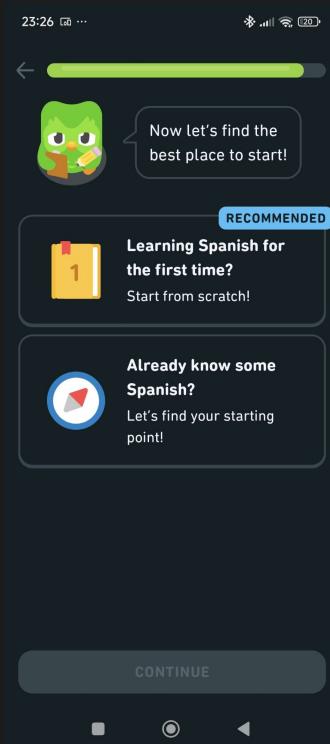
This screen creates motivation, but it's shown during the questions. You promised questions, so why show this here?

## WHY IT MATTERS

Users expect the onboarding to be questions only. Inserting motivational screens mid-flow creates confusion about where they are in the process.

## RECOMMENDATION

Show this screen AFTER the questions are complete, not during. Keep the question flow uninterrupted.



## PROBLEM

This isn't framed as a question. Is this part of the 9 questions? You already asked about proficiency level, now you're asking again?

## WHY IT MATTERS

Repeating similar questions in different formats makes users feel like the app isn't listening. It breaks trust and adds confusion.

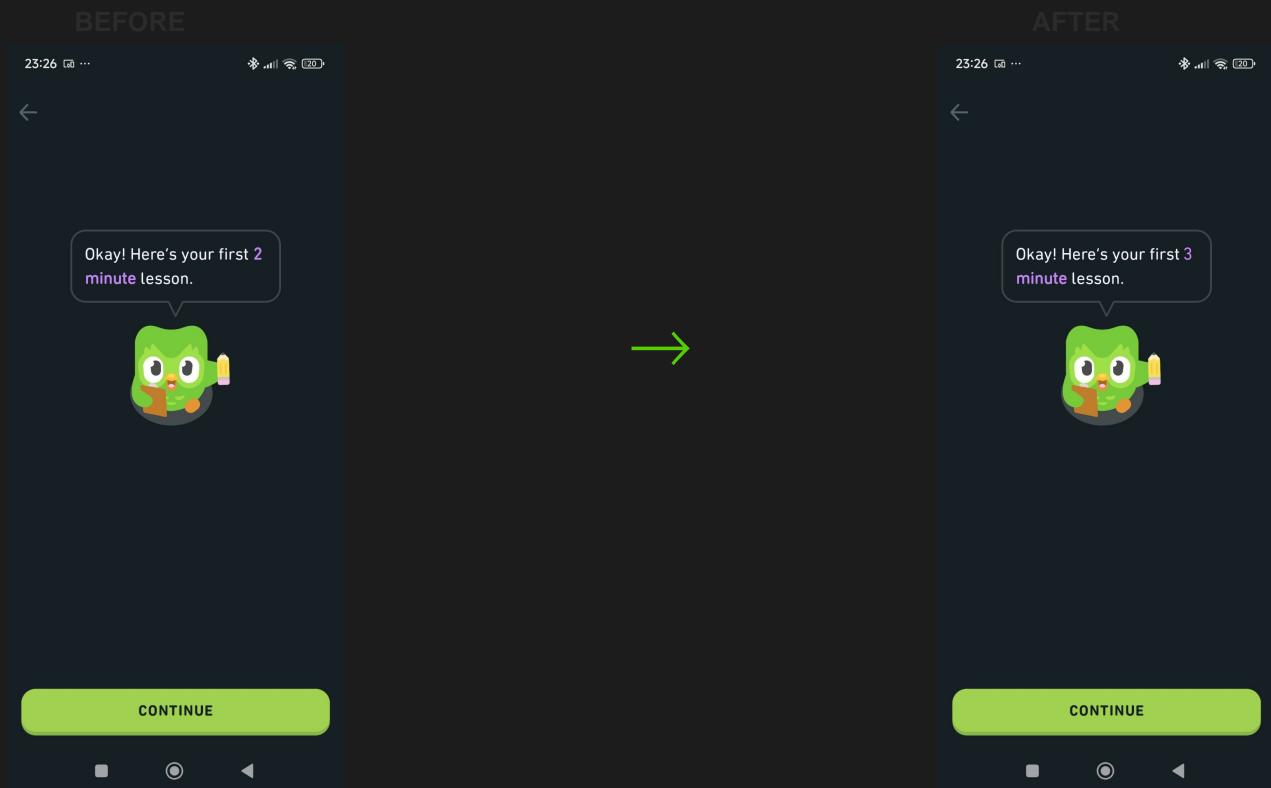
## RECOMMENDATION

Form this into a clear question. Or better yet, remove it - you already know their level from the previous screen.

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## 'Here's your first 2 minute lesson'

CONFUSED

**PROBLEM**

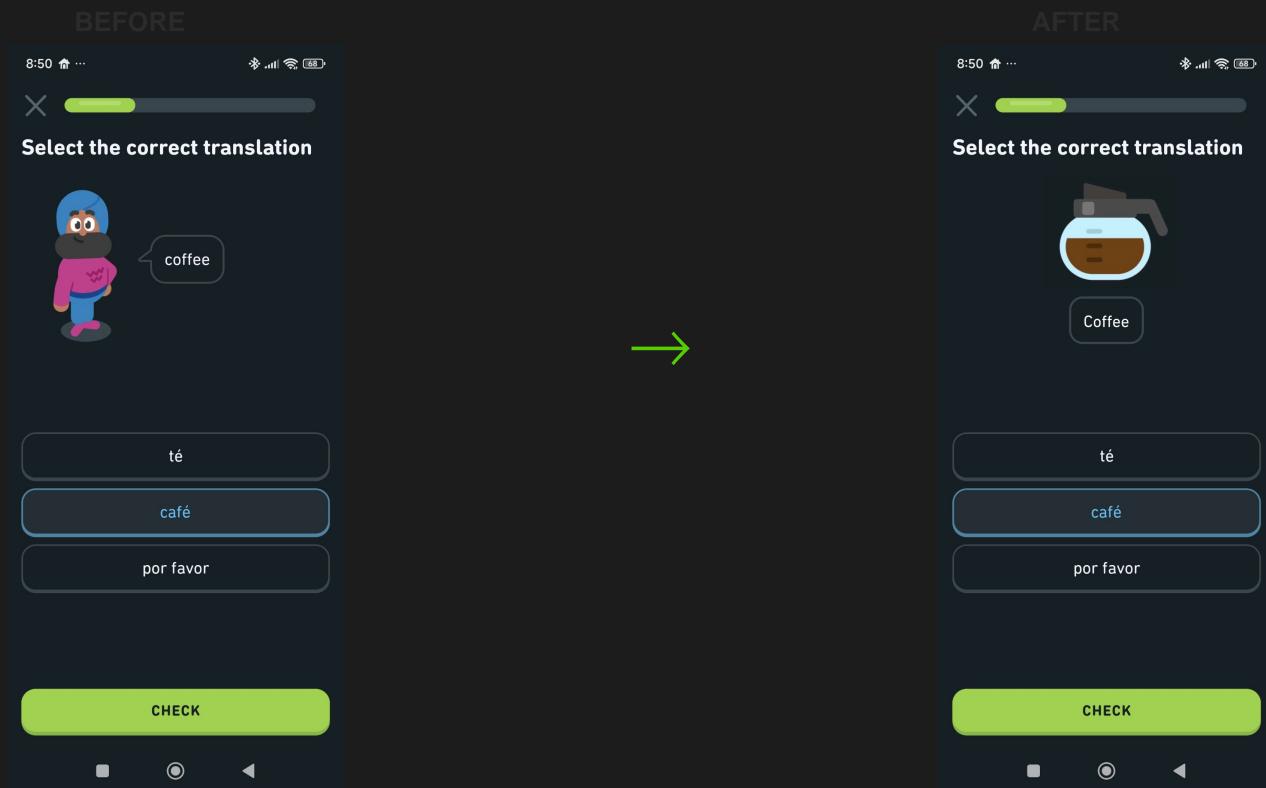
I selected 3 min/day, but this says 2 minute lesson. Inconsistency breaks trust.

**WHY IT MATTERS**

Small mismatches make users question if they did something wrong or if the app is broken.

**RECOMMENDATION**

If user picks 3 min, say 3 min. Consistency matters.



## PROBLEM

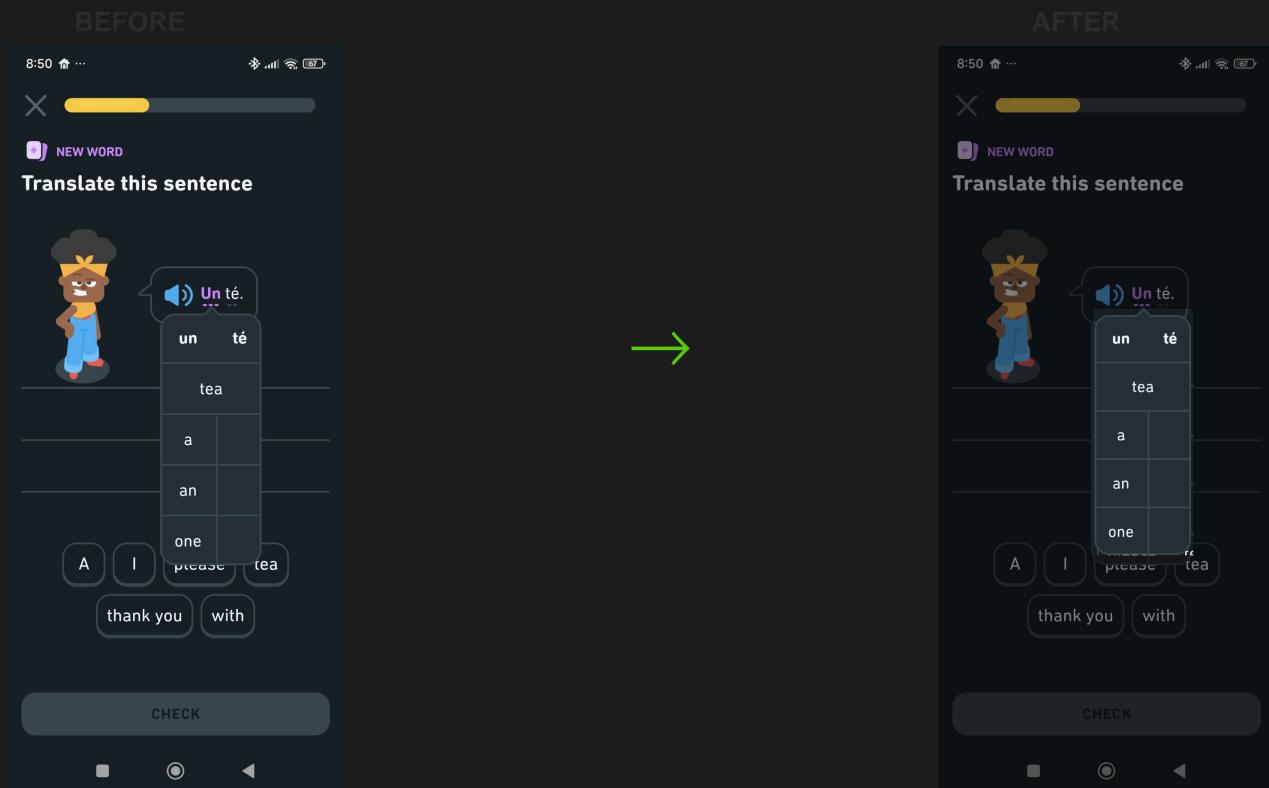
The character saying 'coffee' doesn't help me understand what I'm translating. Visual mismatch.

## WHY IT MATTERS

When learning vocabulary, visual aids should reinforce the word meaning, not distract from it.

## RECOMMENDATION

Replace character with an image of the item being translated (coffee pot).



## PROBLEM

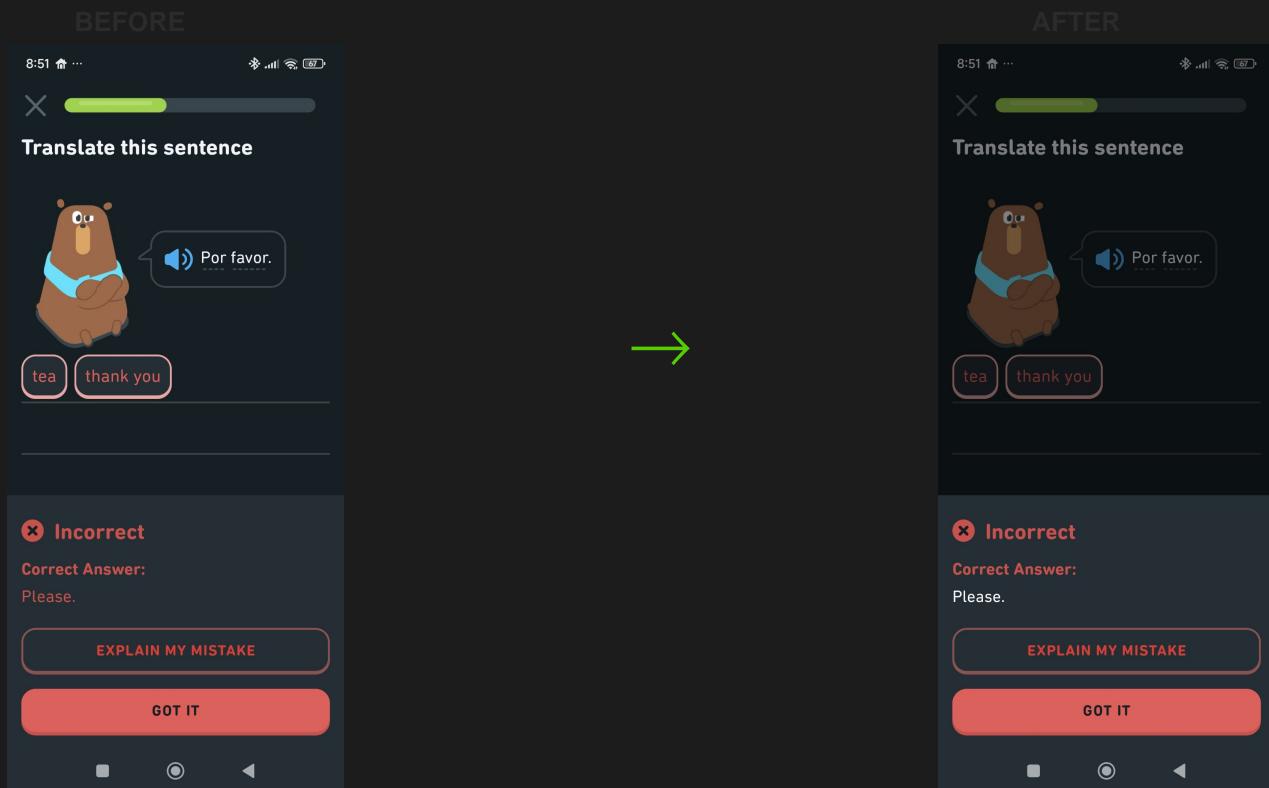
The tooltip popup with word-by-word translations appears but creates visual clutter.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Too many UI elements competing for attention. Where should I focus?

## RECOMMENDATION

Add slight background dim when tooltip is active to focus attention.



## PROBLEM

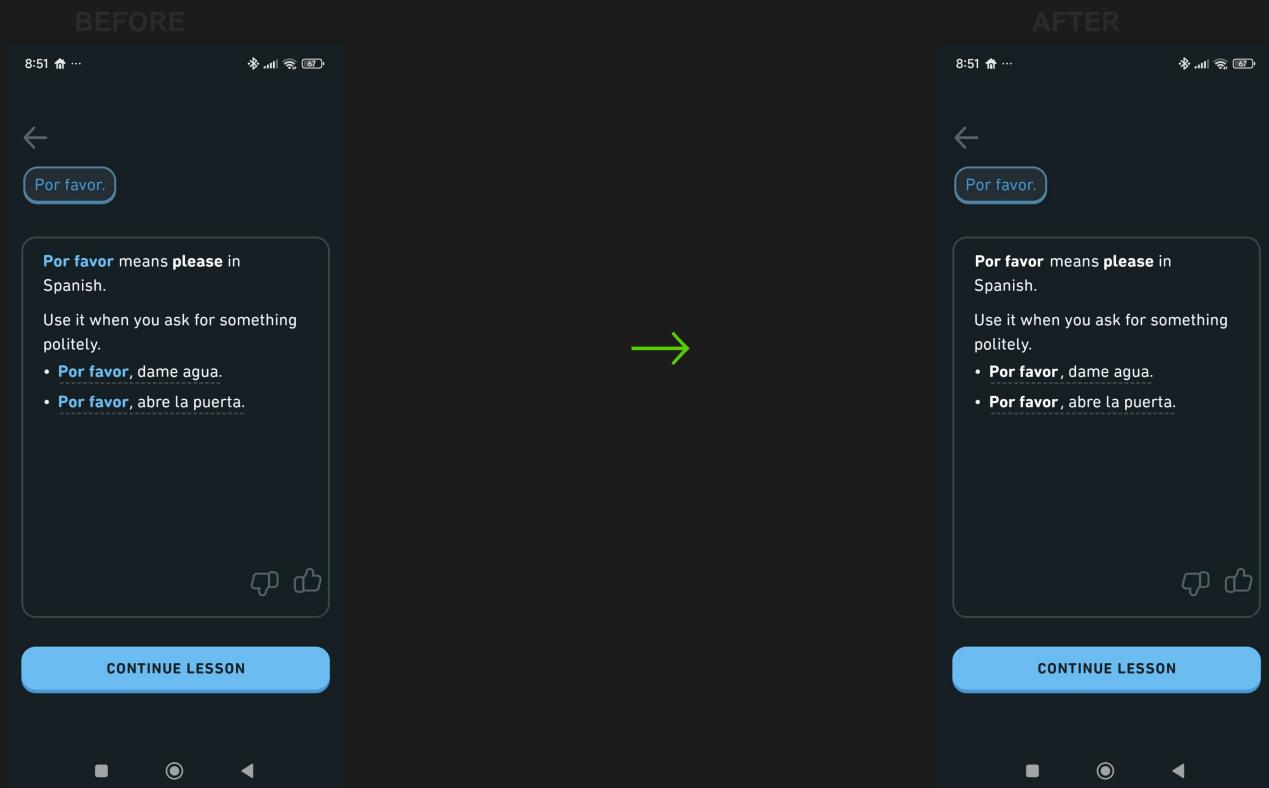
The correct answer is shown in red, same color as the error. Hard to read.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Error states should show what went wrong AND clearly highlight the correct answer.

## RECOMMENDATION

Make correct answer white/bright to stand out from the red error state. Add background dim.



## PROBLEM

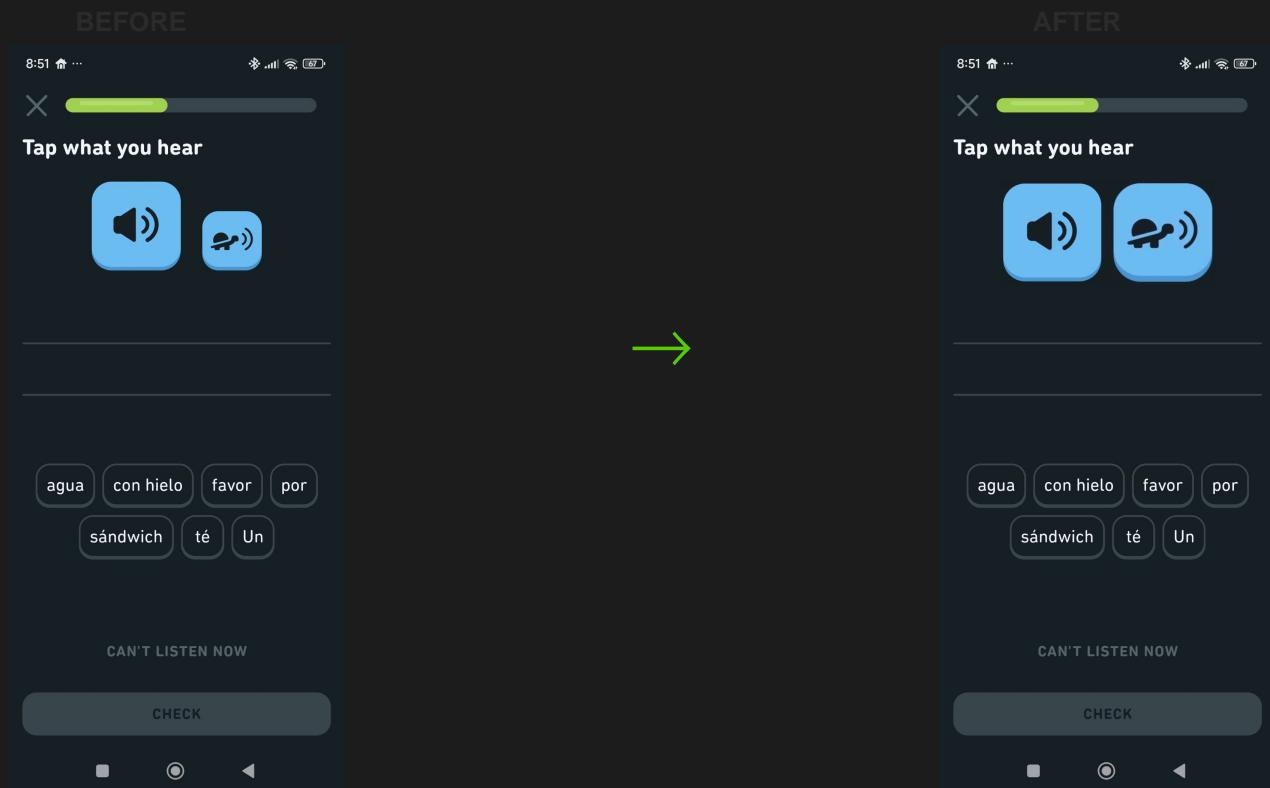
'Por favor' is highlighted blue in the explanation. Why? It distracts from the definition.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Inconsistent highlighting makes users focus on the wrong thing.

## RECOMMENDATION

Remove blue highlight or make it bold white instead. Keep focus on the meaning.



## PROBLEM

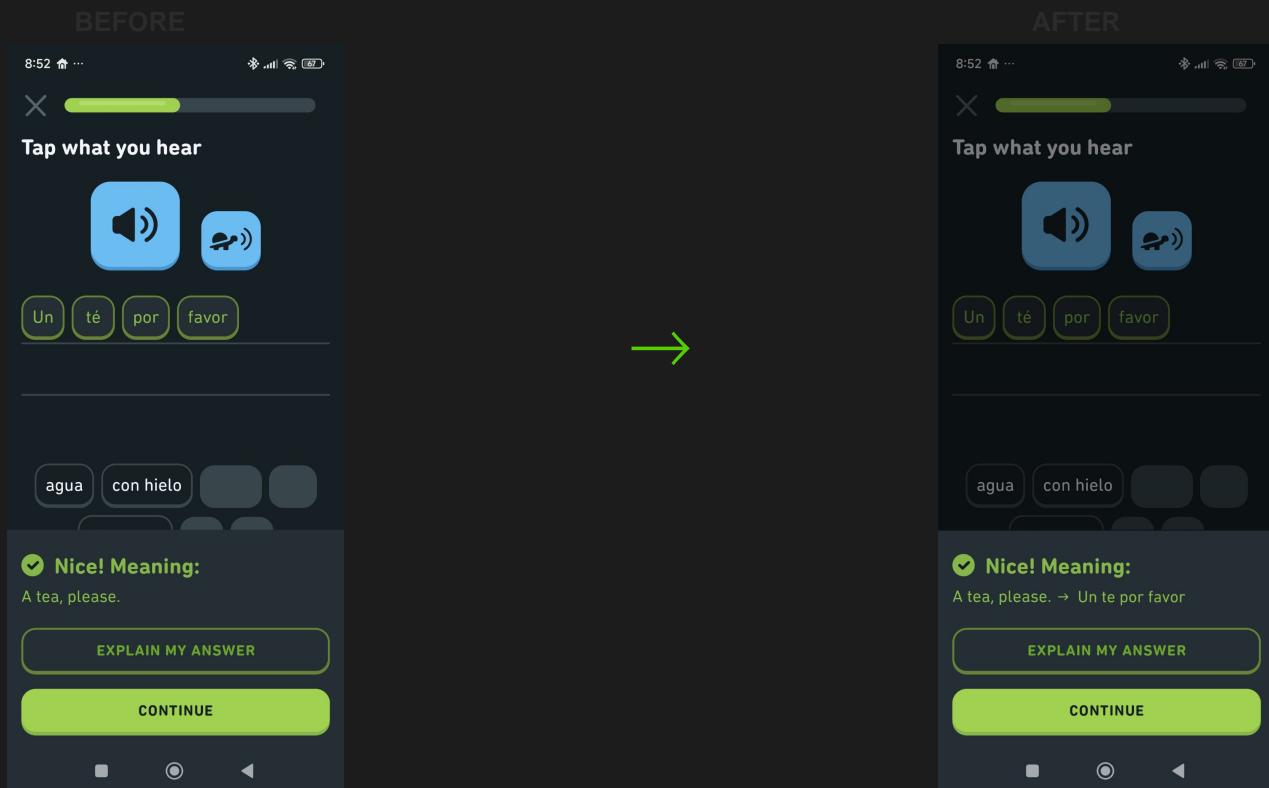
The normal speed icon is larger than the slow (turtle) icon. Inconsistent visual weight.

## WHY IT MATTERS

When one button is visually larger, it implies importance or hierarchy that doesn't exist.

## RECOMMENDATION

Make both audio buttons the same size for visual consistency.



## PROBLEM

When I get an answer right, multiple UI elements compete for attention. Where do I look?

## WHY IT MATTERS

Success states should celebrate clearly, not overwhelm with information.

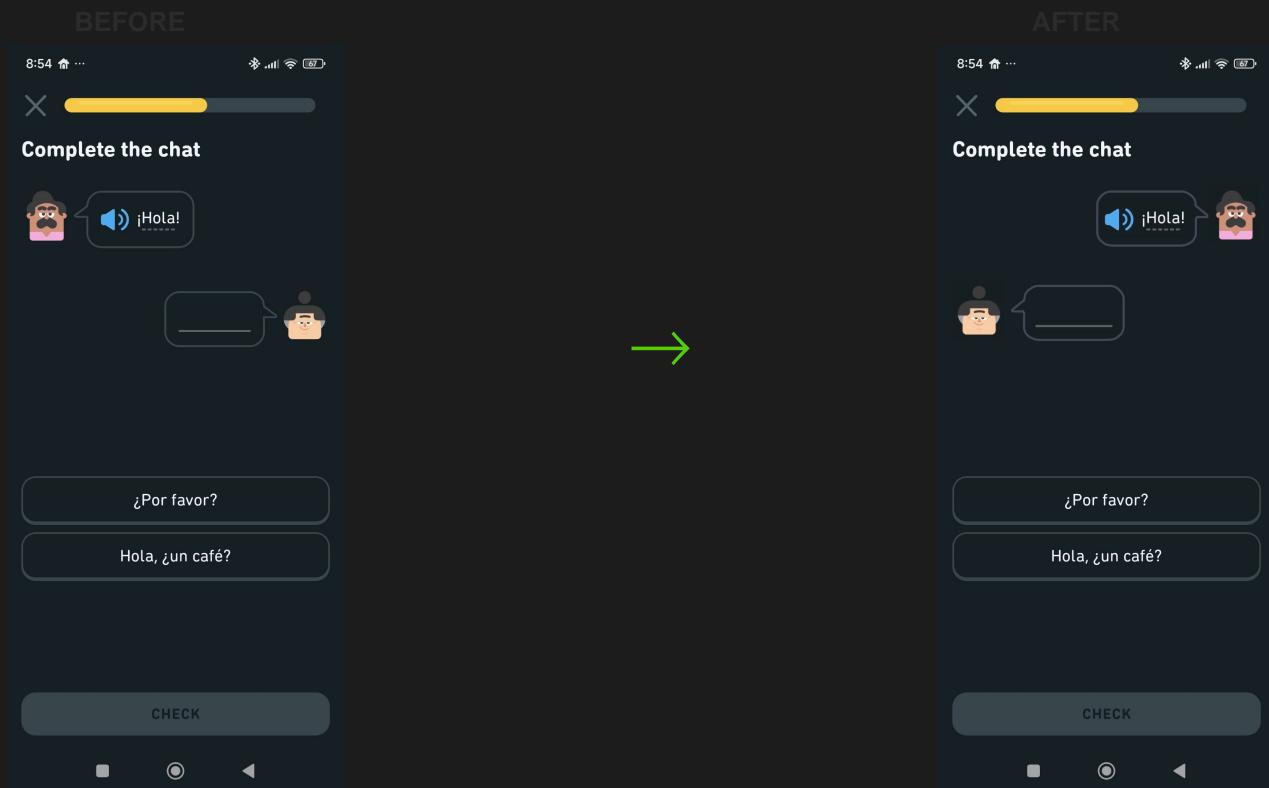
## RECOMMENDATION

Add background dim to focus on the feedback. Show Spanish translation alongside English.

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# Complete the Chat Exercise

CONFUSED



## PROBLEM

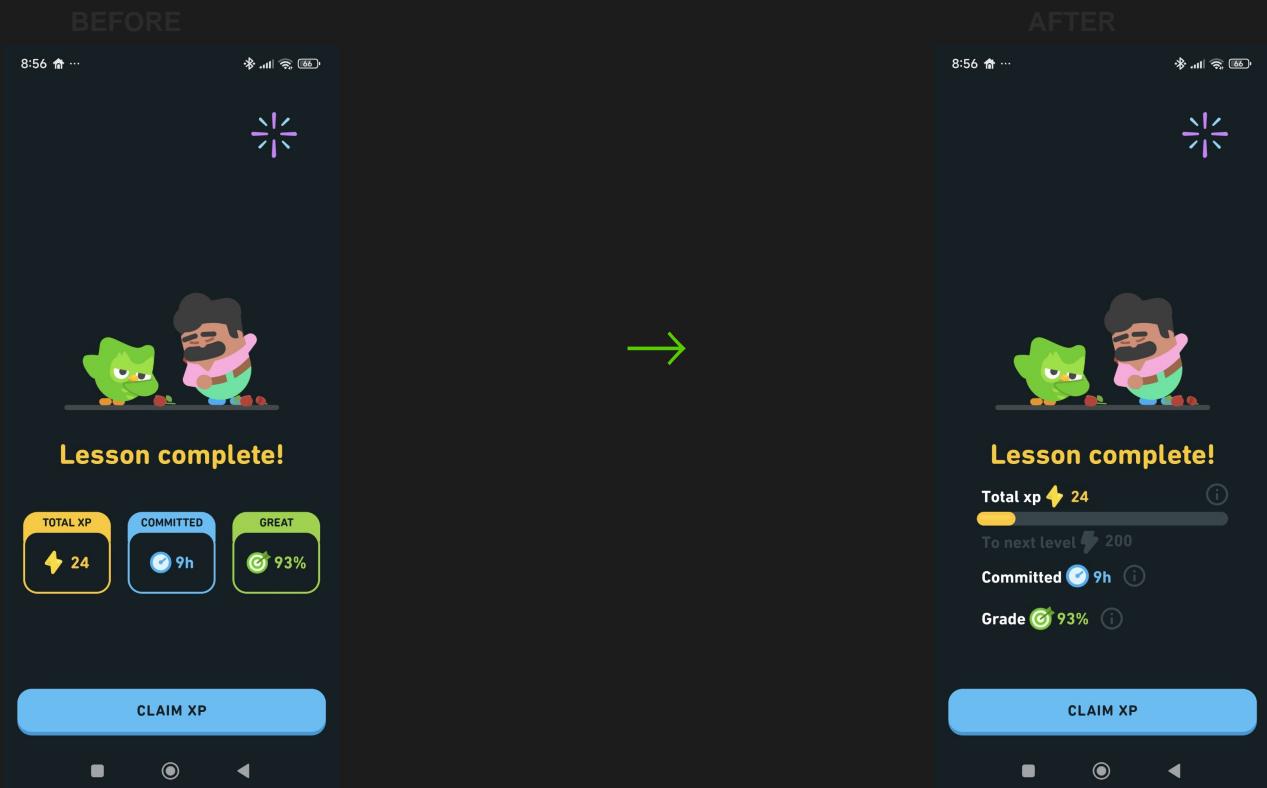
I didn't notice 'Complete the chat' at the top. The empty bubble drew my attention first.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Users scan from top-left or follow visual weight. The empty bubble is more prominent than instructions.

## RECOMMENDATION

Swap chat direction so user's response area is on the left, matching reading flow.



## PROBLEM

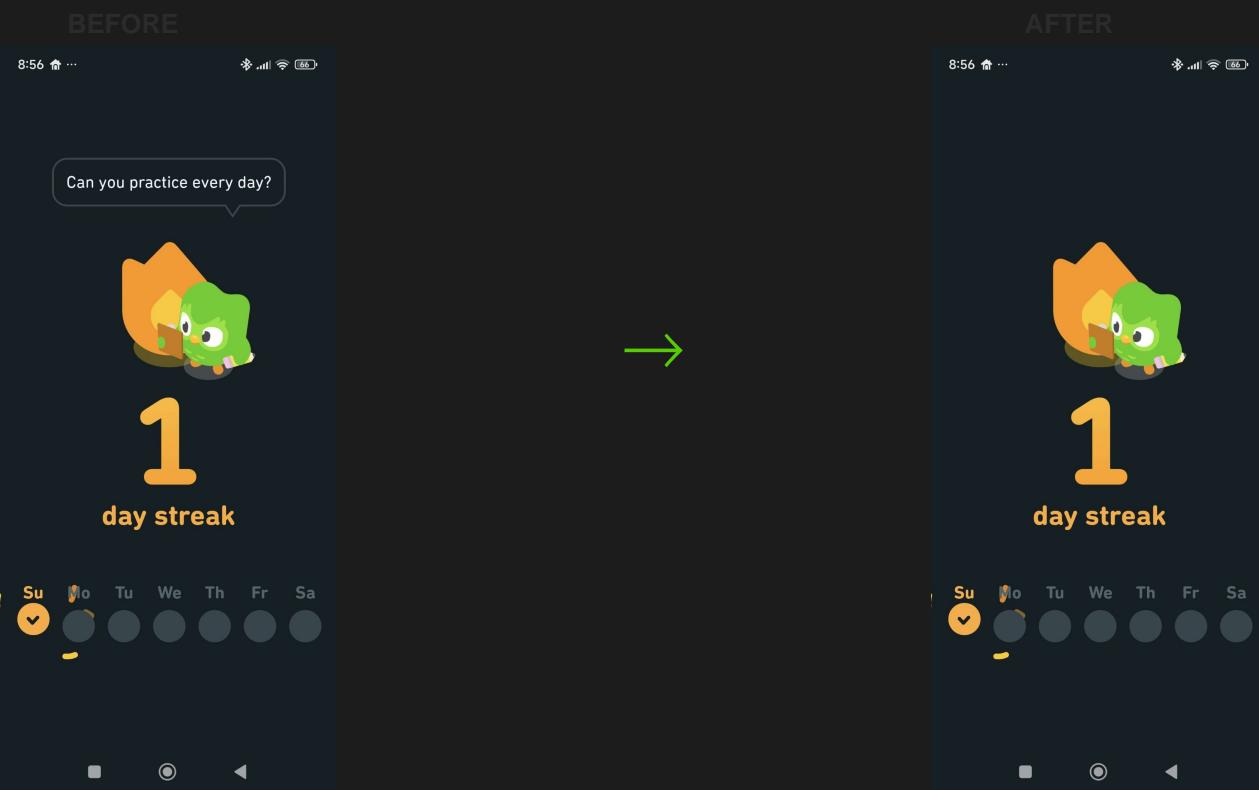
Three stats (XP, Committed, Great) are shown but not explained. What does 'Great 93%' mean?

## WHY IT MATTERS

First-time users don't know these metrics. Unexplained numbers create confusion, not motivation.

## RECOMMENDATION

Add info buttons to each stat. Show progress toward next level. Explain what XP does.



### PROBLEM

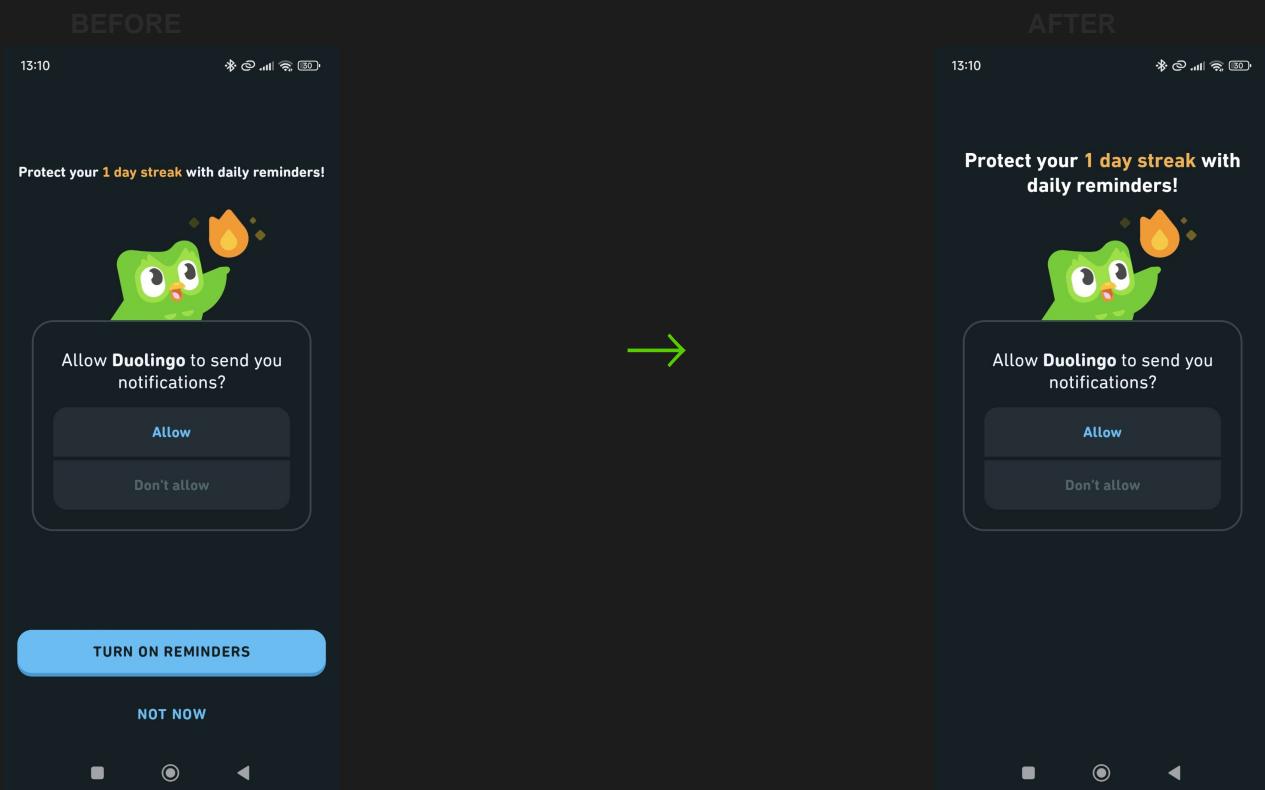
'Can you practice every day?' feels pressuring. The text gets lost above distracting visuals.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Guilt-based motivation doesn't work for anxious users. It creates pressure, not encouragement.

### RECOMMENDATION

Remove the guilt-trip question. Let the streak visual speak for itself.



## PROBLEM

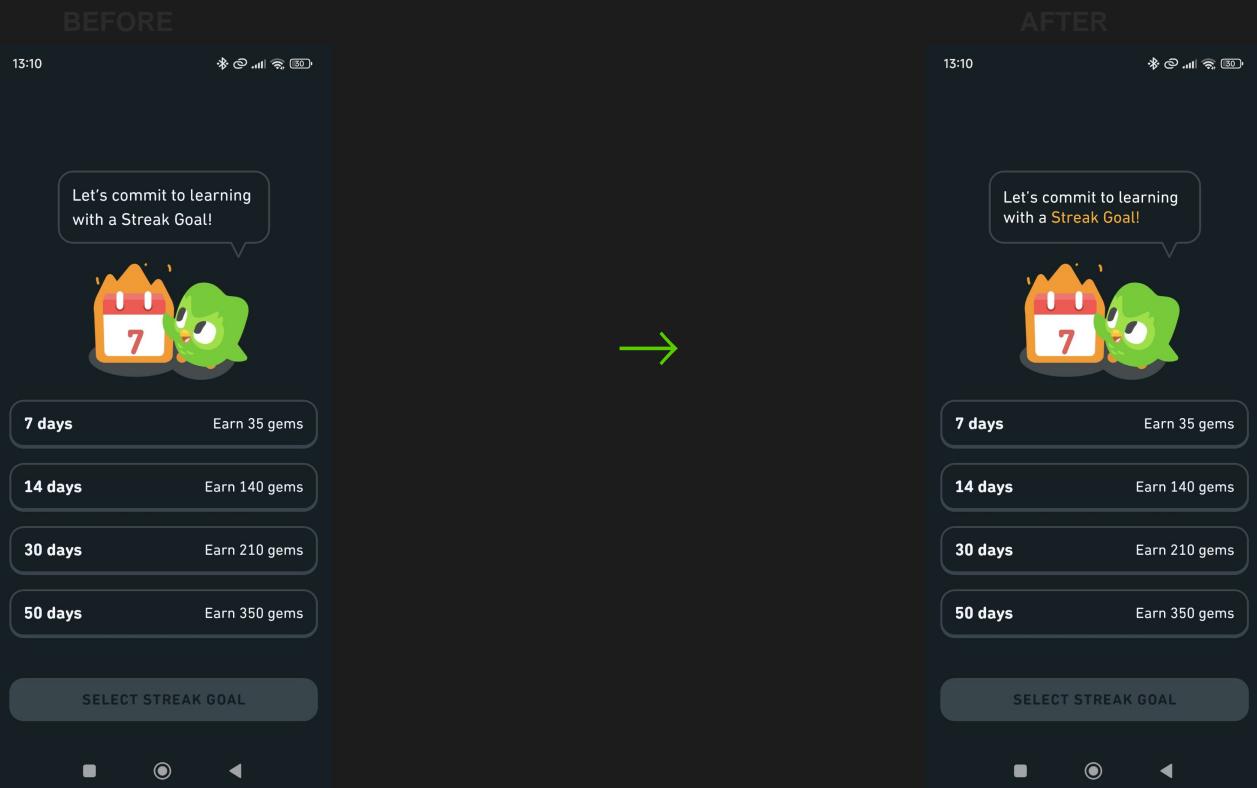
No clear primary CTA. Two buttons (Allow/Don't Allow) plus a 'Turn on Reminders' button. Confusing.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Multiple actions at different hierarchy levels create decision paralysis.

## RECOMMENDATION

Simplify to one clear CTA. Make the headline more prominent with color highlight.



## PROBLEM

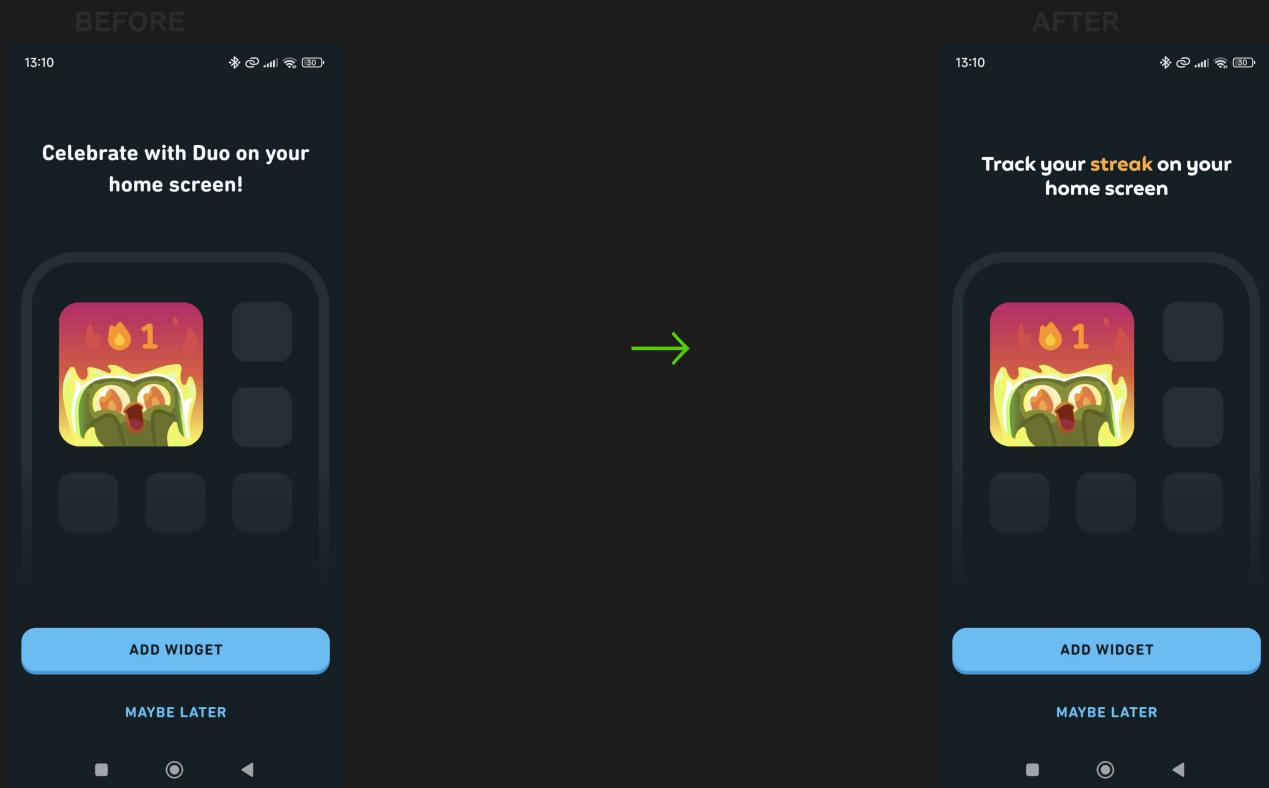
My brain ignored the text in the speech bubble because the visuals below are more attention-grabbing.

## WHY IT MATTERS

When visuals compete with text, text loses. Important information should have visual emphasis.

## RECOMMENDATION

Add color highlight to 'Streak Goal!' in the speech bubble to draw attention.



### PROBLEM

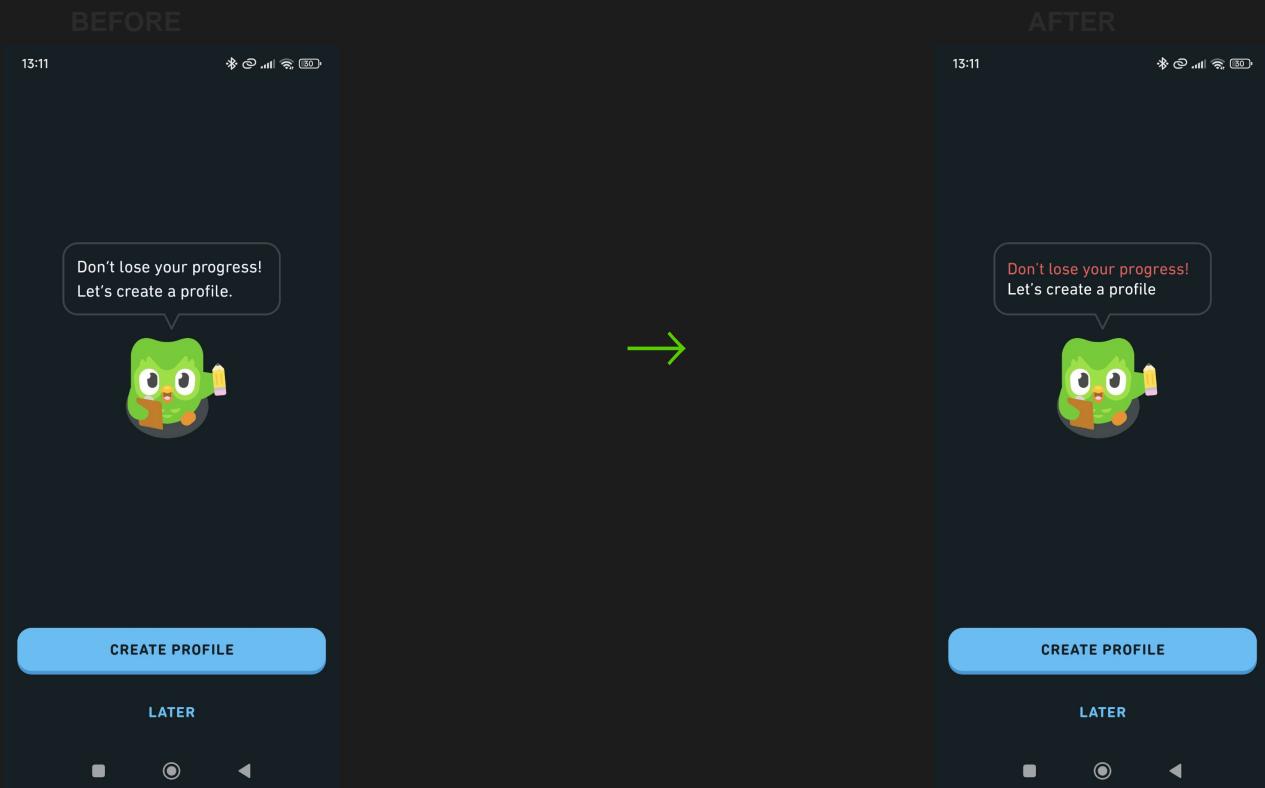
'Celebrate with Duo' doesn't tell me what the widget actually does. Vague messaging.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Users need clear value propositions. What benefit do I get from this widget?

### RECOMMENDATION

Change to 'Track your streak on your home screen' - clear, benefit-focused.



## PROBLEM

'Don't lose your progress' uses fear-based motivation. It feels threatening, not helpful.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Anxious users are already worried about failing. Fear messaging amplifies anxiety.

## RECOMMENDATION

Add color highlight to emphasize urgency without using threatening language. Frame positively.



## PROBLEM

This screen is actually fine and clear to understand. The layout works well.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Clean visual hierarchy, clear progress indicators, and intuitive navigation. This is how screens should feel.

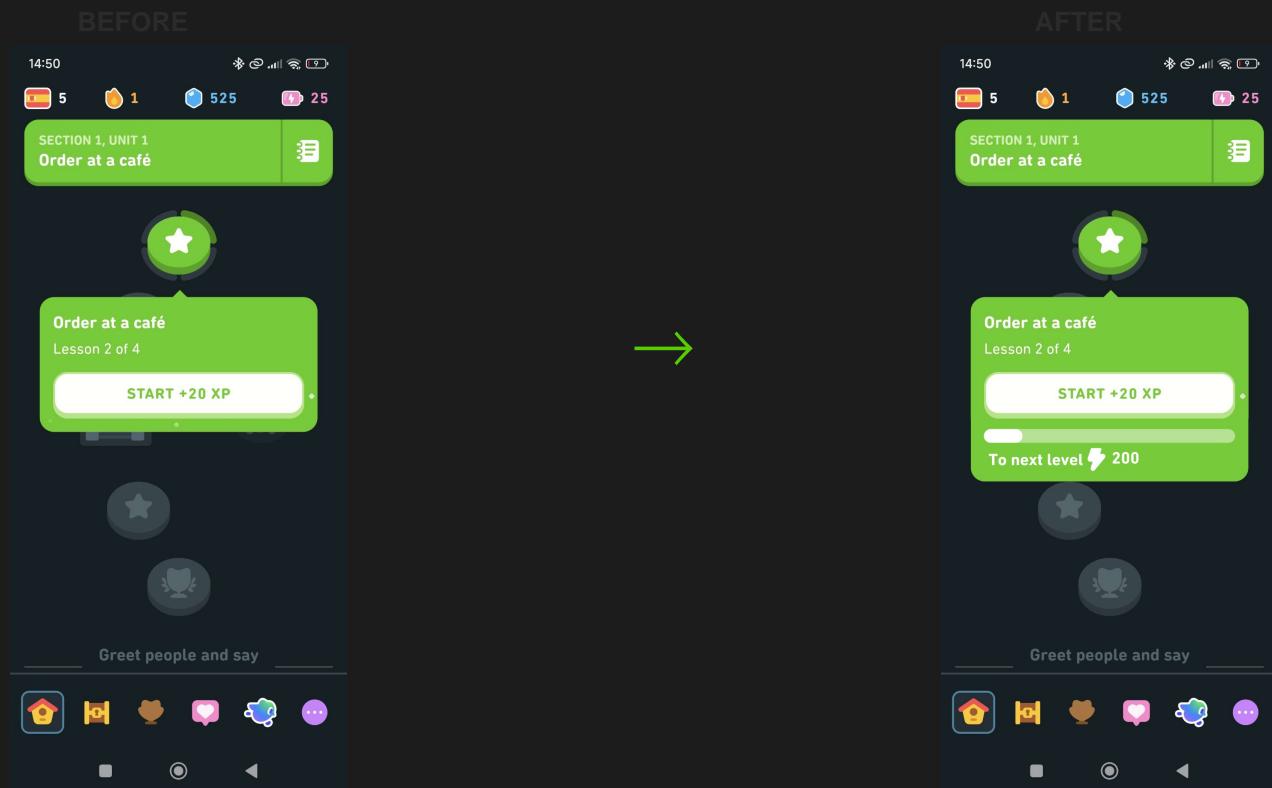
## RECOMMENDATION

Keep this pattern. It's a good example of clear, focused design that doesn't overwhelm.

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# Home Screen - Lesson Start

CONFUSED



## PROBLEM

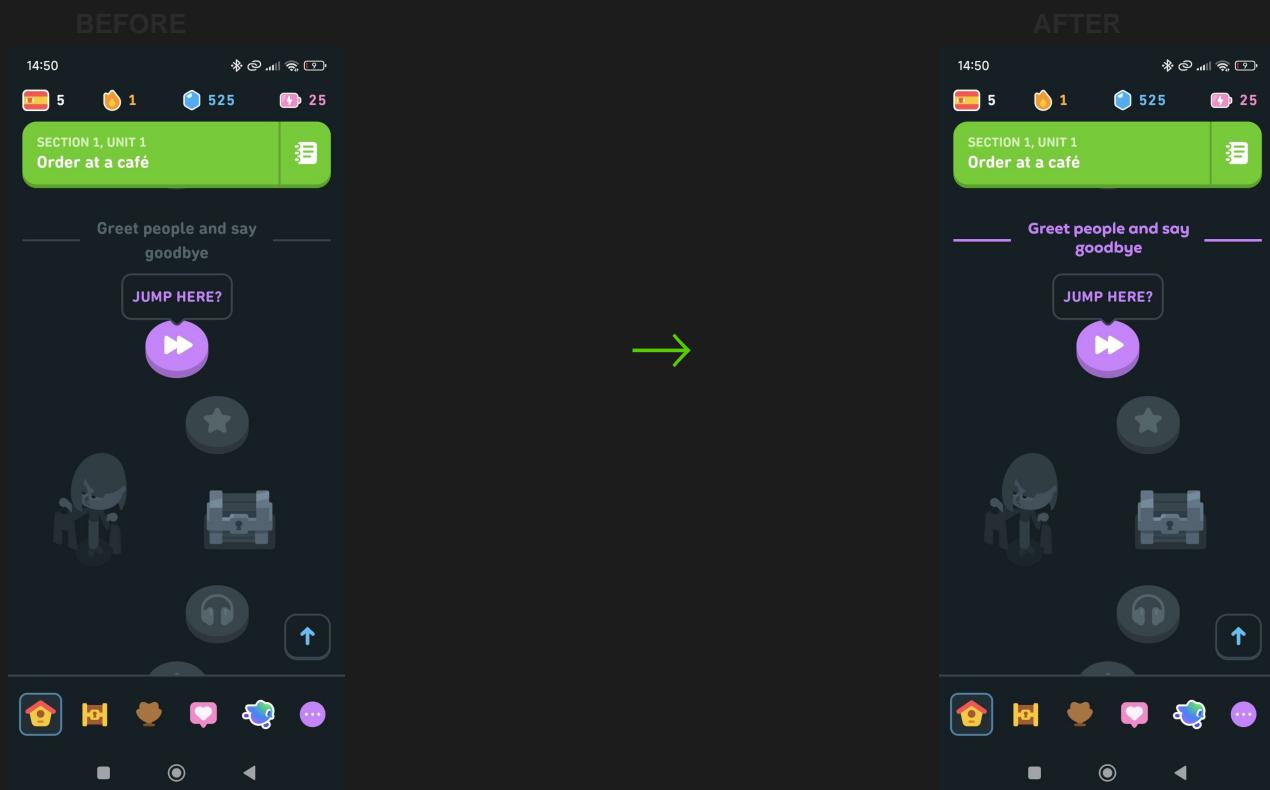
XP is displayed but I still don't know if 20 XP is good or bad. No context.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Gamification only works when users understand the game. Unexplained metrics are meaningless.

## RECOMMENDATION

Show progress bar to next level directly in the lesson card. Give XP meaning.



## PROBLEM

The 'Jump Here' purple button draws all attention. The section title fades into the background.

## WHY IT MATTERS

When secondary elements are more visually prominent than primary content, users get lost.

## RECOMMENDATION

Add color and visual emphasis to section headers so users know where they are.

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# SUMMARY

Key takeaways from this audit

# Key Takeaways

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## 1 Keep Your Promises

If you say '9 questions,' deliver exactly 9 questions. Don't sneak in extra scre...

## 2 Remove Filler Screens

Every screen should have a purpose. 'Okay, we'll start fresh!' adds nothing.

## 3 Consistent Eye Flow

Keep related elements on the same side. Don't make users ping-pong across the sc...

## 4 Reduce Options

Add search/filter for long lists. Let users type instead of scrolling.

## 5 Visual Difficulty Indicators

Use color coding for intensity levels. Green = easy, Red = hard.

## 6 Consistency Builds Trust

If someone picks 3 minutes, show 3 minutes. Small inconsistencies erode confiden...

## 7 Motivate, Don't Guilt

Replace 'Don't lose your progress!' with positive framing that encourages rather...

## 8 Explain New Concepts

First-time users don't know what XP means. Add info buttons or brief explanation...

# Good UX is inclusive UX.

When you design for neurodivergent users,  
you design better for everyone.

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This case study was created as a passion project  
to demonstrate how small changes can make big differences.